



Wisconsin joins worldwide effort to control spread of rabies virus

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MADISON – In observance of World Rabies Day, state animal health officials have some tips for animal owners to ensure the effort to control rabies doesn't last just one day.

"First and foremost, Wisconsin residents should protect themselves and their pets by having their animals vaccinated against rabies," said Yvonne Bellay, DVM at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection. "Vaccination not only protects the animal, but also serves as a buffer to protect people who live in close contact with their animals."

Rabies is a highly infectious and deadly viral disease that attacks the central nervous system. In humans, the disease is preventable by administering the proper post-exposure treatment as soon as a bite takes place.

Wisconsin has only seen four human cases of rabies since 1959, the most recent of which was in 2010. All four cases involved infection by rabid bats. Bats and skunks account for the majority of confirmed rabid animals in Wisconsin and cats are the most common rabid domestic animal reported here.

"Wisconsin state law does not require vaccination of cats for rabies, however many municipalities do require it. Cats are still more vulnerable to rabies exposure, especially if they are outdoor cats because they tend to hunt and roam extensively," Bellay says.

In observance of World Rabies Day, remember these tips to protect yourself and your pets from rabies:

- Vaccinate your dogs, cats, ferrets, and other animals against rabies.
- Enjoy wildlife from a distance.
- Do not let pets roam free.
- Cover garbage cans securely and do not leave pet food outside to attract wildlife.
- Prevent bats from entering your home. If you find a bat in your home, do not touch it. Contact your local animal control officer for assistance.

Pet owners should also be aware of the legal implications of a dog or cat bite. Bites, especially those from unvaccinated animals, can be quite costly to the animal's owner. For example, an unvaccinated animal will be quarantined to an isolation facility for a 10-day period, examined by a veterinarian at least three times and given a rabies vaccination at the end.

"All the costs of the isolation facility, examinations and vaccination are covered by the animal's owner. So, it can add up quickly," Bellay says.

Worse yet, if an animal under quarantine exhibits signs of rabies, state law requires that the animal be humanely killed and the brain submitted for rabies testing. While euthanizing the animal rarely ends up happening in developed countries like the U.S., it is still a possibility, according to Bellay, making the cost of a rabies vaccination seem small in comparison.

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Your veterinarian will recommend vaccination and boosters as necessary. In addition, many clinics and humane societies regularly offer low-cost vaccinations for dogs and cats.

For more information about rabies, visit datcp.wi.gov/animals and select animal diseases. You can also connect with us on Twitter at twitter.com/widatcp or Facebook at facebook.com/widatcp.

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